

From Novel to Cinema: Spielberg's Violation of the Themes of *The Color Purple*

Shradha Kabra

Although the history of adaptation is often considered to be as long as the history of cinema, film departments and the field of film and literature began to emerge only in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States and United Kingdom out of English literature departments. Their tenets, though often contested, revolved around the central concept that viewed a literary work as the valued original, unitary and self-contained to which adaptations, as much as possible, avowed their fidelity. Joseph Conrad's famous statement of his novelistic intention is often reiterated by critics: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the powers of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel - it is, before all, to make you see" (Conrad, p.1). Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982) was adapted into a motion picture by Steven Spielberg in the year 1985 wherein he blatantly disregarded the novelistic intention of the author to "show" what he/she had intended. Spielberg's misreading omitted and violated some of the basic themes and presented on screen a highly amputated and distorted version of the text. In order to appease every section of the society and thereby whip up a commercial success, Spielberg ignored the issues for which the book had become an embodiment of Black Woman's Movement. The characters of Shug Avery and Mr--- were grossly misrepresented and the screenplay bestowed a new denouement to the script which trivialized "womanism" (a term propagated by Alice Walker against feminism which embraces even like-minded men) of the female characters of the novel. Celie's concept of a fun-loving, pantheistic God in comparison to a patriarchal God of Bible, who, according to Celie, was White and thereby cruel and dominating, was completely obliterated from the film which also neutralized the reason of creating an epistolary novel mostly addressed to God. Also, the homoerotic episode of Shug and Celie was marginalized which only succeeded in minimizing the voices of an already triply ostracized group – that of black lesbian women.

For Virginia Woolf cinema was nothing but a predatory animal or parasite happy to devour "its unfortunate victim", literature (Boyum, p.6). Later, George Bluestone's hugely influential work *Novel into Film*, contradicted Woolf's belief, as it opened with the statement that "the film on recent years has become more and more insistent on its claim to serious recognition." (p. vii) By defying Bluestone's claim, Spielberg not only proved Woolf's concern right but also declined to be a member of the coterie of "serious" film makers. He brutally manipulated most of the themes in the novel and chose to create a conciliatory film to target masses from all walks of life. He also succeeded in targeting Academy Awards bagging as many as eleven nominations for the movie.

Hollywood decided to turn the text into a feature film and approached Walker with this intention. She first disagreed with the disconcerting thought of someone else telling her story but was later reassured by Quincy Jones, a black musician, who was not only the music composer of the film but also the executive producer. Walker signed a contract elucidating: "He has a social conscience.... That was very important to me." (Dworkin, p. 174) Walker had also agreed on the grounds that the screenplay would be written by her but due to her mother's and her own illness she failed to write the screenplay and a Dutch

screenwriter, Menno Meyjes, was employed. The Dutch screenwriter and the White Jewish director together created an upbeat, affirmative fable in which patience and family loyalty emerged as cardinal virtues. The discrepancies between the film and the text were glaring. The character of Shug Avery (played by Margaret Avery) was depicted as wild, independent, sensuous and magnetic in the novel whereas in the film Spielberg created a subtheme of Shug's father, a preacher who disapproved of the kind of promiscuous life Shug led. Throughout the film Shug attempted to please him. Such a portrayal is blasphemous to Walker's description of Shug as her incessant desire of reconciliation with her father made her character appear vulnerable.

"In the book, Shug was a "wild woman" and quite unrepentant about it too. [...] To have this woman come back to the church and into the embrace of her father, the preacher who had done sermons about her lifestyle as sin incarnate, definitely undercuts the rebel image of Shug (which was a big part of what drew Celie towards her) and undercuts the movie's overall strong stand against patriarchy." (Dix, p. 197)

Alice Walker herself confessed "... Shug's completely unapologetic self-acceptance as outlaw, renegade, rebel, and pagan" (Walker 1996, p. 35)

In Steven Spielberg's film adaptation even the wife-beating husband had charm. The film portrayed the character differently from the book and the original screenplay. In the film Mr---- or Albert (Danny Glover) seemed more like a caricature of the cruel, dominant character described in the novel. "In the novel, Mister is a heavy, mean and cold to Celie, humanized only by his love for Shug and for his son Harpo [...] Glover is as gentle as a great kind bear, not at all slick - sweetness and maybe the fear of God in his expressive eyes." (Dworkin, p. 180) The novel traced the trajectory of Celie gaining self-confidence and financial independence through the love and support of Shug who took her with herself to Memphis where she started sewing pants. The book ended showing Celie forgiving Albert and becoming friends. He even carved a purple frog for Celie and gifted it to her thus marking his "awakening" as Walker called it. The film, on the other hand, focused on Albert's tragic end which only undermined the importance and tragedy of Celie's painful experience. It also demeaned Walker's "womanism" that embraces humankind and encourages them to live in conjugality. Alice Walker also expressed her fears, "he (Albert) was in almost every scene, in almost every shot, and sometimes I would worry that it was going to become his story – Mister's story, not Celie's." (Dworkin, p. 180) She envisaged a happy ending showing Celie reunited with her family but also Albert and Shug standing in front of the house, being a part of the happiness. This complete harmony wasn't achieved by the movie: Albert was separated and stood on the field only accompanied by his horse, cutting a sorry figure. Walker pointed out that; "to end with him on his horse seems John Wayne-ish, and makes it seem he's more responsible and in control of the happiness he's observing than he is. The feeling of the people is *circle*, not hierarchy." (Walker 1996, p. 143)

The epistolary form of the novel allowed Celie to first share her problems with God and later with Nettie. In the opening scenes, Spielberg used the same words as in the novel; "You better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." (Walker 1982, p.1) But as the film proceeded, Celie's transforming views about God wasn't depicted. In the novel, Celie's God, although her confidant, was a patriarchal White Male, stern and unjust to black women like Celie. She told Shug, "the God I been praying and writing to

is a man. And acts like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (p.199). But she moved away from such a notion of God to a more pantheistical notion when Shug told her that God is neither “he” nor “she” but “it”. “God is everything. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be” (p.203). Such a trajectory wasn’t traced by Spielberg. In the original screenplay Walker described how Celie was sewing a quilt using pieces of fabrics that had some special meaning to her life, like the pieces of her father’s checkered bib, the dress she was wearing when raped by her step father, Nettie’s blouse she left behind and Shug’s dresses. Walker wanted the scenes to look like in this fashion: “As she works totally absorbed, cutting, placing, contemplating, sewing, we should have the feeling that in putting these poor scraps of her life together Celie is in fact praying - and telling her story to God” (Walker 1996, p. 63). Alice Walker pointed out a major flaw of the film which was that it lacked a process of tracing Celie’s self reflections without which she couldn’t have turned into an aggrandized being capable of standing up for herself and fight for her rights as she did in the end. The film didn’t show this process although one can hear Celie’s words as voice-over at the beginning. The words used are similar to the ones in the book but a connection to God is not made obvious. In Walker’s screenplay Nettie asked Celie if she ever wrote back. Celie, in turn, gave her the finished quilt with the last square showing a “large rising purple sun with yellow/orange rays, filling the square, filling Life.” (Walker 1996, p. 136) The quilt also had the words “Dear God” in the first square as well as many symbols of Celie’s life - her mother’s illness, her rape, her children, she being beaten by Albert, Nettie and Shug leaving and so on. (Walker 1996, p. 114) The movie didn’t underline the importance of these experiences or the changed meaning of God in Celie’s life.

Lastly, Alice Walker was not shy when dealing with her female characters’ sexuality. Historically, “images concerning the sexuality of black women were fought over and neutralized in the past” (Bobo 1991, 78). Alice Walker dared not only to highlight women’s sexual desire but also celebrate lesbianism as a way to liberate the lives of women who had been objectified on a daily basis. As quoted by Bobo, “Barbara Christian observes that contemporary black women writers have developed the theme of sexuality as a source of empowerment, for its suppression is another form of women’s oppression” (Bobo 1991, 78). Walker had so explicitly described the homoerotic episode of Shug and Celie that it couldn’t be more graphic. Walker’s description was not only subversive but also empowering as Celie’s lesbianism didn’t only underline her subsequent sexual fulfillment but also a means to break away from the patriarchal mould of her surroundings and gain a voice. Celie revealed her sexual life with Albert when asked by Shug how it was like:

“He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep.” (Walker 1982, p. 80)

Shug remarked after the shocking disclosure by Celie, “you make it sound like he going to the toilet on you” (p.80). When Celie confirmed that that was exactly how she felt Shug was quick to conclude that Celie was still a “virgin” and initiated her into her own sexuality. In Walker’s frank treatment of female sexuality, Shug taught a frightened Celie – “who is scared to look at her own pussy” (Walker 1982, 82) – about her clitoris, to look at herself in the mirror and examine her sexual organs and her breasts, she further introduced her to oral sex, and finally into masturbation.

Listen, [Shug] say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter then it melts. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lot of sucking go on, here and here, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work...Button? Finger and tongue? My face hot enough to melt itself. (Walker 1982, 81)

And eventually the discovery of her own body leads her to discover her sexual love for Shug as Shug was one of the few people who loved Celie.

She say I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth.

Um, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, um, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other . . . then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too. (Walker 1982, 118)

The love-making scene had a detailed description in the book while Spielberg haphazardly presented it with a close-up shot of their faces and hands, sitting on a bed, exchanging a few chaste kisses and then the camera moved and focused on a wind chime and dissolved. Spielberg must have thought the homoerotic relationship "inadmissible" and transgressive. Thus, his film adaptation intentionally manipulated and subverted the episode on lesbian love. In the article "From Walker to Spielberg: Transformations of *The Color Purple*", Joan Digby added, "Spielberg's film softens Walker's approach to sex ... in order to produce a mass-audience Hollywood film" (1993, 161). In her highly critical article "Blues for Mr. Spielberg", Michelle Wallace confessed that she felt "alarmed" when hearing that Spielberg was working on *The Color Purple*, called the director "the boy wonder of pop culture", furiously denounced that the film was "the trivialization of non-white culture and female pain", and rejected the final product as "a comic Birth of a Nation" (1990, 67). In her rage, Wallace also argued that in Spielberg's reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* "all signs of a black feminist agenda were banished, or ridiculed beyond repair" (1990, 72). On the lesbian story, Wallace had something else to say: "Celie obviously loves Shug, but it's Hollywood love, a series of chaste kisses" (1990,73).

Walker wrote in a letter to a friend (Walker 1996, p. 214): "... it was a bit like seeing a deformed child and seeing it as deformed, rather than as interestingly, if curiously, different from what had been envisioned." It is evident that Spielberg's adaptation of *The Color Purple* lacked fidelity to Alice Walker's tone and intention. Undoubtedly, alterations of the text were motivated by an attempt to make a "populist" film (the euphemism Spielberg uses for popular or commercially successful). The film restrained itself from stirring the controversies started by Walker's path-breaking text. The lesbian relationship and Celie's departure from a sacrosanct White God to a more humanistic and pantheistic God would not have been easily accepted by the audience in mid 1980s. Focusing on such themes would have only jeopardized Spielberg's movie leading to colossal losses. The director avoided foraying into such a challenging domain and therefore conveniently chose to suffer from selective amnesia while dealing with some of the basic themes of *The Color Purple*. As I have shown, many themes were either violated or simply excluded from the film thus creating a version which was a far cry from the original text by Alice Walker.

Works Cited:

- Bluestone, George. *Novels Into Film*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003.
- Bobo, Jacqueline. "Black Women in Fiction and Non-Fiction: Images of Power and Powerlessness". *Wide Angle*. 13: 72-81.
- Boyum, Joy Gould. *Double Exposure: Fiction into Film*. New York: Universe Books, 1985.
- Conrad, Joseph. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. New York: Buccaneer Books, Inc, 1976.
- Digby, Joan. "From Walker to Spielberg: Transformations of *The Color Purple*". *Novel Images: Literature in Performance*. Ed. Peter Reynolds. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Dix, Carl. *Thoughts on The Color Purple*. Cambridge, MA: Revolution Books, 1985.
- Dworkin, Susan. "The Strange and Wonderful Story of the Making of The Color Purple." Ms. Dec. 1985: 174, 180.
- Walker, Alice. *The Same River Twice: Honoring The Difficult*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1996.
- . *The Color Purple*. London: Phoenix, 2004.
- Wallace, Michelle. "Blues for Mr. Spielberg". *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*. London: Verso, 1990.